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ABSTRACT

A study/research partnership between university teacher educators and teachers was formed when teachers at the third-, fourth- and fifth-grade levels decided to implement an innovation called Literature Response Groups in their classrooms. The setting was an urban elementary school in northern California. Participants included six elementary teachers, a reading specialist, a university faculty member, and a graduate student intern. Data were collected through group meetings and discussion, participant-observation, classroom observation, and interviews. The study/research group provided a structure for support of the classroom teachers as they implemented a teaching innovation, the "literature response group." The results support the efficacy of the study/research group in promoting teacher professional development. The group provided a safe environment for risk-taking and an opportunity for collaboration. Implementation required intense effort over a sustained period of time, and it was necessary for teachers to be able to turn over some control to students. This was particularly an issue for some teachers who feared the loss of control while they continued to be held accountable for classroom management and student achievement. The degree of innovation varied with each teacher but most teachers were successful at implementing the innovation. (Contains 26 references.) (JLS)

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ED 408 248

Literacy Partners: Teacher Innovation in a Study/Research Group

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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A study/research partnership between university teacher educators and teachers in an urban Northern California elementary school formed when teachers at the third-, fourth-and fifth-grade levels decided to implement an innovation known as Literature Response Groups (Daniels, 1995) in their classrooms. The innovation was designed to increase student motivation and responsibility for their own literacy learning, and to assist teachers to allow students more control over the direction of their learning. Teachers requested university resources and support in this democratization in the roles of teachers and students and thus a study/research group was formed which lasted throughout the 1994-1995 academic year.

Many individual questions informed the group research, but the data presented here represent only two of the author's questions: (1) How do individual teachers initiate and enact an innovation such as Literature Response Groups in the elementary classroom? (2) How would the study/research partnership affect the enactment of the innovation?

Theoretical Perspective

Current research into teacher development supports the notion that the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) is the way in which human beings learn. Prawat (1992) and others argue that teachers are both important change agents in the efforts and educational reform and restructuring as well as major obstacles to change because constructivist approaches to teaching are inconsistent with much of what teachers believe and the way they have been trained. In addition, much of what is done in the professional development of teachers follows a "diffusion-adoption" model (McDonald, 1988). Instead, the move to empower teachers calls for a problem-solving approach to professional development for teachers (McGowan & Powell, 1993, Prawat, 1992).

In order for teachers to reconceptualize their teaching, a new model of professional development is clearly required. To extend authority from the teacher to the student requires that teachers must experience a sense of empowerment themselves (Lieberman,

1992; Prawat, 1992). Reform movements in literacy have centered around interactive instructional approaches in which students have considerable control over their own learning (Moll & Whitmore, 1993), but a corollary concern has been over how to support teachers in critically examining their beliefs about literacy learning and subsequently, their instructional practices. Part of this concern has been the decreased autonomy of teachers' individual control over their careers. Increasingly, districts have assumed the authority and responsibility for professional development in an age of reform. Lately, increased authority has been assumed for this area by states and the Federal Government. A dichotomy exists between reformers who seek "empowerment" of teachers and those who seek their "accountability" (Elmore, 1990).

Those who advocate for empowerment do not eschew accountability, but may characterize the educational enterprise in terms of democracy and advocacy (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Short, Giorgis, & Pritchard, 1993). Often, however, professional development activities are mired in a didactic and hierarchical model of learning at odds with the content espoused. They may also offer short term "recipes" for practice unconnected to research. In fact, it is widely recognized in education that the world of research and the world of practice need to be reconnected (Powell, Berliner, & Casanova, 1992). Teachers and researchers find themselves living in the same educational world, but frequently are unable to communicate with each other. Practitioners may see research as unresponsive to the realities of the classroom or as couched in user "unfriendly" terms that are difficult to apply to practice.

Teacher study groups appear to promise a supportive social environment for positive change in a community of practice. This study seeks to investigate and enlarge upon the body of knowledge surrounding this promising professional development alternative.

In contrast to the way many teachers currently instruct, recent research into literacy development supports the idea of "voice" in the sense that students are encouraged to respond to literature and to interact with one another over those responses, and "choice" or the

right and responsibility of students to choose what they read and how they respond to it (Gambrell, 1994). Reader response research indicates that such voice is important because students cannot effectively move to the level of analysis until they have worked through, processed, savored, and shared their personal responses (Daniels, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1978).

In Literature Response Groups (LRGs), small temporary discussion groups are formed around books (usually tradebooks) which children have chosen to read. Each group member takes responsibilities for the reading and discussion of the chosen selection. When the book has been read and discussed, students usually plan a way to share the highlights of what they've read with their classmates. New groups are then formed around new reading selections. Daniels (1995) reports twelve key features of LRGs. Important features include that students choose their own reading material, groups read different books, groups meet on a regular predictable schedule, and students suggest their own discussion topics.

Teachers must prepare students to take on the responsibility for conducting group discussion sessions (and act as facilitators of these sessions), monitor their own behavior and learning, and successfully interact with other students. "The teacher's work in literature circles is complex, artful, and absolutely essential. It just doesn't happen to include any lecturing, telling, or advising" (Daniels, 1995, p. 25). It is sometimes difficult for teachers to strike the right balance with Literature Response Groups. Teachers must prepare students to take on emerging behaviors without assuming too much responsibility or offering too much responsibility too early.

Thus, the underlying ingredients of scaffolding (Bruner, 1961) include predictability in that there must be a regular schedule for LRGs, and a recurrent pattern for the LRGs themselves. Teachers and students should be playful and open to spontaneity such that the activities lead to a sense of closeness and community. Skills need to be subordinated to meaning; there should be a focus on constructing meaning and sharing ideas. In LRGs the students are afforded opportunities to be experts and leaders. The teacher is a model of

mature and enthusiastic language behavior in a "joyfully literate" way (Daniels, 1995).

Methodology

The author wished to investigate whether a teacher study/research group would instantiate with teachers the democratized elements of social learning and problem solving to be passed on to students. In keeping with this, Cambourne's (1994) six defining characteristics of co-researching guided the project as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Cambourne's Six Defining Characteristics of Co-researching

(1) Co-researching is both a relationship and a process;
(2) Co-researching involves a team of (at least two) people;
(3) Co-researching works best if the members of the team have similar broad or global interests but different levels of focus;
(4) Each party has a common stake in something to which they attach some importance;
(5) In a co-researching relationship there is an implicit understanding that all parties involved will learn something from the enterprise;
(6) There are no experts and no novices in a co-researcher relationship.

Participants included the author, who coordinated a graduated literacy leadership program at a prominent research university in Northern California, six elementary teachers at "Shore" elementary school, a moderate-to-high SES urban public elementary school, the Reading Specialist at Shore, and a graduate student interning at Shore. Students in intact classrooms at each grade level (two each third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade) also participated. The site administrator supported the partnership activities and attended some of the study/discussion groups. She also provided release time for participants to report on their findings at a conference on teacher

research. Study/research group participants are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Study/Research Group Participants

Name	Affiliation/Grade Level
Katie	Third Grade
Paula	Third Grade
Patty	Fourth Grade
Helen	Fourth Grade
Sierra	Fifth Grade
Matt	Fifth Grade
Maria	Reading Specialist
Sophie	University Graduate Student Intern
Dana	University Researcher

Data collection included multiple sources of data.

First, the study group met on multiple occasions in September to work out the guidelines of the project, and then periodically throughout the year. Meetings were held about every three to four weeks, except for a two-month hiatus (December1994/January 1995). The meetings followed a loosely organized protocol: each teacher reported what was occurring in his or her class, including items they wanted to clarify. At some meetings, the subjects raised led to requests for information from university participants. The university researcher provided literature searches for articles and books which were read and discussed by the participants. The university researcher and graduate intern set up an observation of Literature Response Groups in another district, for example. Teachers requested that the university researcher facilitate the meetings, but I did not act as an "expert" on Literature Response Groups. Instead I acted as another inquirer into the process by sharing my questions with the teachers. Reciprocally, they often acted as mentors for me during the meetings and in the classroom observations. During the study/research group meetings I took extensive field notes. These notes were reviewed over multiple

occasions for verification and triangulation of premises, as well as for disconfirming evidence.

Second, when the study group was expanded to include teacher research, the author provided participants with Cambourne's (1994) co-researching guidelines. All teachers participated in the self-study of their curriculum enactments; most teacher questions focused on the efficacy of the intervention in terms of student achievement and attitude. This data is reported elsewhere (Grisham, et. al., 1995), but forms part of this data set.

Third, observations of teachers enacting Literature Response Groups in the classroom were made and field notes compiled, reviewed upon numerous occasions, and used form verification and triangulation of premises, as well as for disconfirming evidence. Each teacher was observed in his or her classroom several times by the author or other participants during the year. The graduate intern made observations during her tenure at the school, thus conversations (including e-mail communications) between the graduate student and the author form part of the data set. The intern also constructed a Master of Arts thesis based upon her research in the classes (Ziegler, 1995), information which also informed this study. The Reading Specialist made several observations and wrote field notes. These were shared with the author, and form part of the data set.

Fourth, all teachers were interviewed about their participation in the project and their attitude toward the innovation. All of these (except one) were audiotaped, and the audiotapes transcribed in full for data analysis. One teacher, who asked not to be audiotaped, was interviewed using field notes only.

No teacher journals were kept because teachers expressed no willingness to do this.

Research methods are interpretive (Erickson, 1986) and tend to ask the question "What's going on here?" (Wolcott, 1988). The author is the primary research "instrument" for the questions asked above (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and was a participant-observer in the project. The data were examined thematically to determine emergent patterns. Multiple sources of data, as outlined above, allowed for

triangulation to ground emergent themes and interpretive conclusions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

Qualitative data reflect that each teacher in the study group implemented Literature Response Groups in a unique and individual manner and within their own time frame.

Third Grade

The two third grade teachers felt constrained by the need to teach "how to read" along a skills continuum. These primary classes followed a split schedule, in which one half of the class came early for reading instruction and one half of the class came late. Thus LRGs were conducted with only half the class at a time and in these two classes, the students were ability grouped for "early bird" and "late bird" cohorts.

One third grade teacher, Paula, modified the literature discussion process such that it somewhat resembled a basal reading lesson. Students were offered two choices of tradebooks. These were carefully selected for the readability level of the students. Each group met with the teacher to do a directed reading activity (similar to those found in basal series) and read aloud in a round robin style. The second group worked on seatwork activities while the first group met with the teacher. After each group had "discussed" the book, they met to plan a brief presentation to share it with their classmates. The changes enacted by this teacher, who was close to retirement age, represented a significant departure from more traditional past practice.

The other third grade teacher, Katie, implemented Literature Response Groups, but expressed misgivings after experiencing difficulty with readers of varying ability levels, particularly her "low" students. After December, Katie moved her LRGs into the main part of her day so that they did not interfere with her regular reading instruction time. This made implementing the LRGs much more difficult as the entire class was present and time was limited, but Katie felt that her students needed the structured reading time.

Katie struggled throughout the year with her conceptions of literacy and the relative benefits of direct reading instruction and literature response.

Fourth Grade

One fourth-grade teacher, Helen, began by devoting time to using short stories from the basal reader as choices for Literature Response Groups in her classroom. She selected several stories from the basal, did short "booktalks" on these to arouse student interest. Helen then asked students to write their first three choices on a slip of paper. These were collected and the requests sorted into literature response groups based upon student requests. Students read the stories, using post-its to mark items of interest, then wrote in a journal about their responses. They met one group at a time with Helen or her intern to discuss their responses. Later, the students prepared a brief presentation to "share" the story they had read with their classmates. Shortly after this experience, Helen successfully transitioned to chapter books and the class used LRGs three more times that year. Eventually, students met without the teacher present to facilitate the discussion.

Patty, on the other hand, began directly with chapter books, and because she often used collaborative learning in her classroom, her students were accustomed to interacting together. Patty's students used post-its, established their own reading schedule, and discussed within groups without teacher facilitation. They also planned their own presentations based on the ideas all the teachers shared. Patty struggled with classroom management issues during LRGs.

Fifth Grade

In contrast, a fifth-grade teacher, Sierra, began Literature Response Groups with a chapter book which the whole class read. Sierra used various methods to model and scaffold the experience, including a "fishbowl" technique where students observed a group of volunteers proceed through a literature discussion session and then discussed what they saw. Sierra also moved successfully to multiple

literature selections, although she later returned to a whole class format to introduce the use of journaling about the book selection. Sierra felt very confident about her ability to support students through this process, and was active in supporting other teachers to implement LRGs. Issues for Sierra surrounded organization and follow through.

Matt, the only male teacher in the study, implemented literature study in some respects, but not in others. He gave students choices of tradebooks, for example. However, he controlled conversations instead of allowing students to control them. Matt's struggle surrounded his belief that the teacher's role should reflect the legitimate authority of the adult. Matt felt like he needed to remain in control.

The Study/Research Group

Teachers expressed appreciation for the support provided by the study/research group. They reported that they felt more confident in trying a new teaching strategy because of their participation in the study group. Literature response groups have been documented by other researchers and by other teacher-researcher groups (Keegan & Shrake, 1991; Samway, Whang, Cade, Gamil, Lubandina & Phommachanh, 1991; Short & Pierce, 1990), thus LRGs are not new. Nevertheless, for this study/research group, the innovation was new and the risk to self was therefore high. Each teacher felt successful in implementing the innovation in his or her own way and felt that participation in the group had changed their practice for the better.

Participants from the university brought books and articles on the innovation to the group and this input was discussed and utilized by the teachers. More important than the "research literature" to the teachers, however, was the opportunity to compare notes on what they were doing in their classes, thereby socially constructing the innovation. Teachers reported feeling relieved of pressure to "conform" to some standard and more empowered to try making the model fit their own conceptions and teaching styles. They also reported that they felt less constrained by perceived timelines of

enactment when they found other teachers not yet ready to "jump in." Teachers stated that they appreciated having a university educator available to them as a resource and sounding board.

Teachers felt that empowerment became a reality for them. All teachers in the study/research group expressed satisfaction about participating in the study group and in posing and researching their own questions about their practice. Not everyone in the group researched systematically or wrote up their findings, but two participants who presented their work at a teacher research conference stated that they felt enhanced professionally by the experience. Every teacher in the group was eager to continue the study group into a second year and echoed the statement of one who reported she felt "on the cutting edge" of practice.

LRG Enactments

As reported, most of the teachers were successful at enacting the innovation. Notably, one fifth-grade teacher (Matt) and one third-grade teacher (Paula) were unable to move away from their fixed assumptions about the nature of learners and learning as subject-centered rather than learner-centered. All teachers in the study grappled with the notion of aesthetic response (Rosenblatt, 1978). Each teacher also grappled with issues that were more personal and idiosyncratic; for example, Patty's struggle with classroom management issues during LRGs and Sierra's struggle with keeping herself organized.

The data did support a change in teacher/student roles which occurred over time during the study. Teachers successfully scaffolded the targeted learning experiences for their students and experienced differing degrees of success in surrendering control over student learning activities. This control issue was one that we revisited again and again in the meetings and reflects the variance between what practitioners may "know" and how they act. Even for those who "believed" that students needed to take responsibility for their own learning found themselves acting in ways that emphasized a more directive approach.

An example of this conflict is apparent in one sequence when I was observing in Sierra's fifth-grade class. A group of students were discussing a book without a teacher as facilitator. They were responding to their favorite parts of the story, and spontaneously connecting that to their own lives, both LRG activities which could be considered "on task" and desirable from an aesthetic reading perspective. The teacher came over to the group and redirected the conversation into more efferent directions, asking, "Why do you think the main character did that?" Students amiably changed their discussion and gave their input to the teacher. Satisfied, she walked away. Almost immediately the students resumed the discussion of their favorite part of the book. At that time, Sierra had a student teacher in the room. The student teacher next came to visit the students. She was much more analytic in her questions, which formed a traditional I-R-E pattern: "Who was the main character? What was it he did? Why did he do that?" Again the students responded appropriately to the student teacher, who moved off after another few seconds. As she left, the students paused, looked at each other and then over at me, and resumed talking about their favorite part of the book.

This vignette illustrated for me the dilemma the teacher faced. She "believed" that students needed to spontaneously discuss the reading selection. She also "believed" that unless she directed their talk, they might waste valuable instructional time for which she was accountable. This conflict in beliefs was a major topic of the group meetings and of discussions between teachers. This was one of the major reasons that teachers were interested in obtaining objective, quantifiable evidence about the efficacy of the innovation. Teachers were disappointed that comparisons on norm-referenced reading achievement pre- and post-test results proved inconclusive. However, the teachers were pleased with their students' progress in reading. They also reported (and observations and a survey confirmed) that students were engaged with and enjoying the literature discussions. For Helen's and Sierra's students, a 65% aesthetic response level (Cox & Many, 1992) was recorded for the discussions (Ziegler, 1995).

Discussion

Findings from this study support the efficacy of the study/research group in promoting teacher professional development. Much like students, teachers need a safe environment in which to take risks. Teachers appreciated the opportunities to interact collaboratively over new information, and some appeared to be making the connection between their own socially constructed knowledge and that of their students. Even the two teachers who were least successful in giving up control expressed doubt about their ways of doing things when faced with the evidence compiled by the other teachers. The successes of Patty, Helen, and Sierra were compelling to the others. Katie, who experienced a more limited success, also provided evidence that third-graders were capable of discussing books effectively. Matt and Paula had trouble surrendering control to their students, but both felt they had made significant strides toward a more student-centered reading curriculum. University appreciation of teacher initiative in departing from "boilerplate" models was critical to the professional development process.

Nevertheless, the implementation of Literature Response Groups in these teachers' classes required intense effort over time on the part of teachers and presented significant barriers to be overcome. First, teachers had to make the conscious decision to relinquish power in the form of expertise to the student. Control over the content of the discussion was a considerable worry for teachers who found themselves intellectually convinced that students need "voice and choice" in their response to literature, but who worried about being held accountable for student achievement. Teachers also worried that they would be perceived as having lost control of the classroom, which might be noisier or less "orderly." The compilation of considerable material resources to conduct Literature Response Groups was another challenge which may prove problematic to many teachers interested in implementing LRGs.

In order for teachers to succeed at complex changes in practice, it is certainly helpful for them to participate in a supportive network.

Once teachers learned to "trust" in the members of the study group (particularly the author, a representative of the university), they reported feeling "safe" to make changes in their classrooms. They appreciated the processes of feedback and validation of their efforts and found the opportunity to report their research experiences to other teachers intrinsically satisfying. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether lasting cognitive change has occurred, the author feels optimistic about this, given the teacher response.

During this project, all the participants learned much about LRGs and about teacher research (Patterson, Stansell, & Lee, 1990) and how to sustain both. The collaboration between universities and local school districts over projects which are mutually selected can encourage and support such innovations, while validating teachers' needs to reflect upon and improve their own practice through teacher action research (Lieberman, 1992). Projects like the one reported here encourage all participants to investigate their individual questions from varying perspectives and objectives in order to contribute to the body of knowledge about literacy learning and teaching pedagogy.

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